

Healthy kids, healthy communities

by Sheila Gardner
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In a perfect world, everyone in Carson Valley would have the same easy access to healthy food choices and active lifestyles.

There would be multiple bike or hiking paths. You would be able to walk from your duplex in the Gardnerville Ranchos to a grocery store or farmers market any day you wanted.

A safe bike path would take cyclists from the outskirts to the Carson Valley Swim Center in Minden.

You could take accessible public transportation to go mountain biking or hiking.

DETAILS

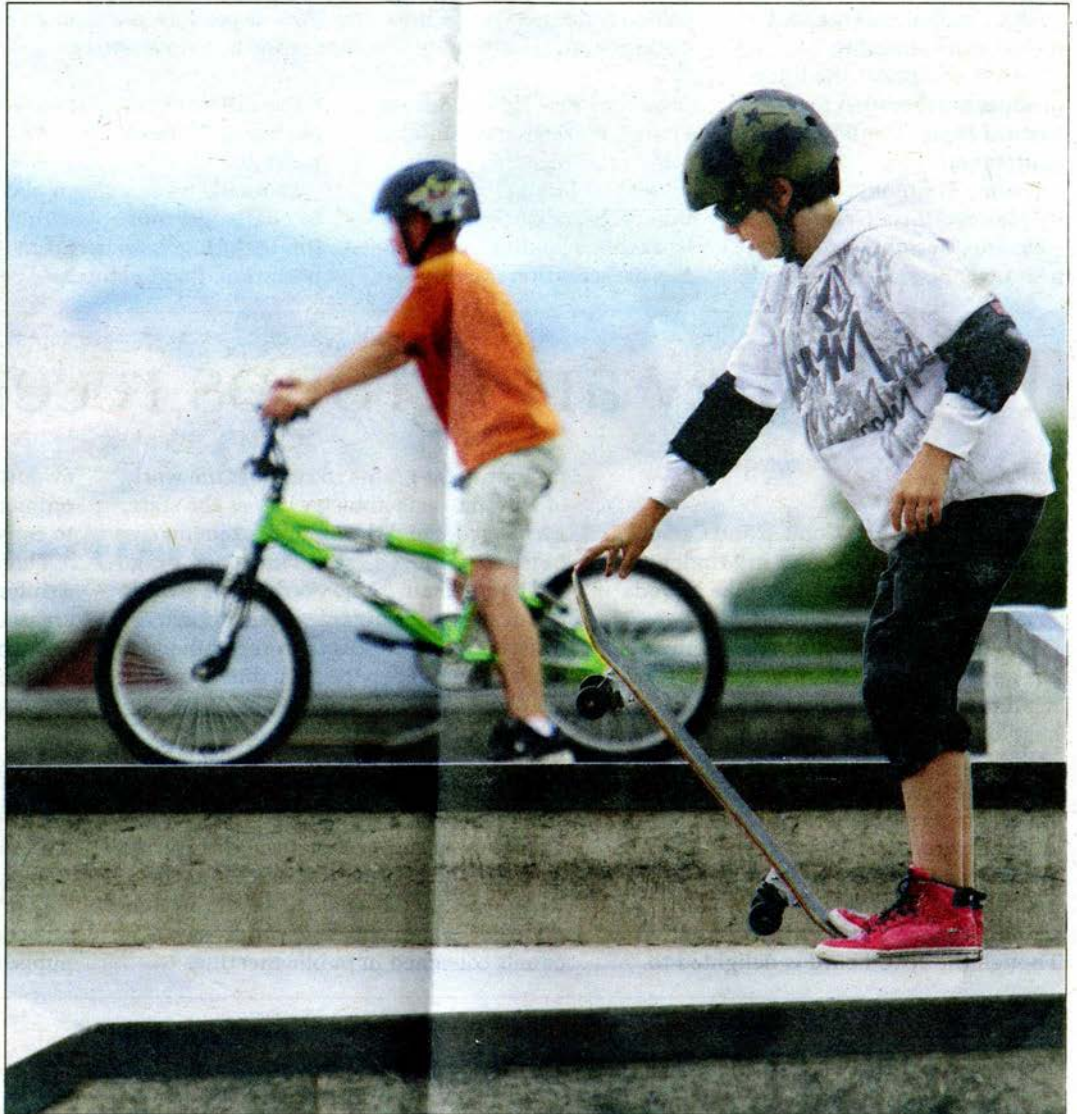
For information on Generating Rural Options for Weight-Healthy Kids and Communities, contact Steve Lewis, Cooperative Extension educator, 782-9960.

While some of these projects are in the works across the county, the rural nature of the area makes Gardnerville one of four communities in Nevada under study by Oregon State University researchers who received a \$4.8 million federal grant to study obesity prevention in rural children.

Project director Deborah John is emphatic about what her research is not.

Nobody is calling Gardnerville fat.

"I have no idea what the obesity rate is in Gardnerville," John said in a telephone interview from her OSU office in Corvallis, Ore. "It's not that we don't care that people live with that condition, but we are not putting our emphasis on the people. We are



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HEALTHY, 5 Recreation facilities and parks can help promote a healthier lifestyle.

HEALTHY

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focusing our assessment and ultimately targeting the environment."

She enlisted the help of Steve Lewis, Cooperative Extension educator, and Cheryl Bricker, Partnership of Community Resources, who put together a team for Generating Rural Options for Weight-Healthy Kids and Communities.

Their volunteers used GPS technology provided by project directors John and Kathy Gunter to photograph and map the community by foot, bicycle or car.

The group began meeting in April, and got together last month for a "community conversation" with John at the CVIC Hall.

Lewis said he was as surprised as anyone to learn that rural children are not necessarily as healthy as kids in urban areas.

"The incidence of obesity is 6 percent higher in rural communities," Lewis said, echoing John's research. "It might have something to do with culture, the availability of healthier foods. It might have something to do with what we were experiencing as we did our research. We were moving around in cars, not walking. One person did ride a bicycle."

Lewis said the project is intended to "spur a consciousness that might not otherwise have been spurred — to get people thinking about these kinds of features our communities offer or don't offer."

He said John's research targeted Gardnerville, but he expanded the parameters to include Minden because the communities are so closely intertwined.

"I believe we are going to be a different community as a result of this conversation," Lewis said.

John said she found Gardnerville to be ahead of the curve.

"My sense was that Gardnerville is closer to the middle in preparing to make long-term, lasting changes to eat healthy and be physically active every

ON THE WEB

Green Living Festival
Sept. 21, 2013, River Forks
Ranch, Genoa Lane
www.greenlivingfest.org

day. Gardnerville is already moving toward change. Some communities are not even thinking about it. I am excited to see what Gardnerville does with this information," she said.

The other Nevada communities are Laughlin, Carlin and Caliente.

It is not her intention to tell a community what to do.

"We, as outsiders, don't ever want to impose our presence on a community. We appreciate the work that you all are doing in the community. It's the community who provides the data, all we do is look through a particular lens," John said.

"As project directors, we envision a way to increase the capacity in rural communities to address issues they are faced with every day, and assure all people have healthy lifestyles.

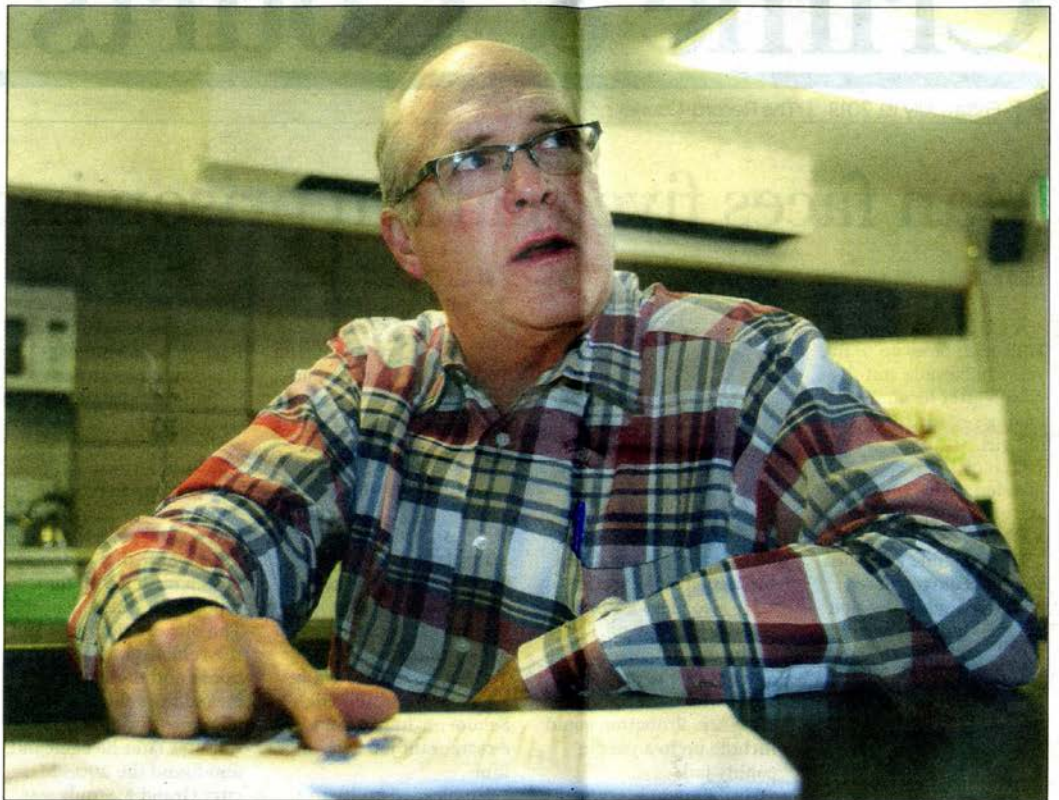
From beginning to end, the community does the work. The community literally has to make hard, hard choices."

Factors researchers looked at included income, transportation, culture, population, and accessibility.

"If I am a person with a lower income, basically, the suggestion is I need to eat fresh healthy food every day," John said. "But I am dependent on food assistance to buy food for myself and family. The only place I can easily access food is a convenience store within walking distance of my house. I don't have the same opportunities even if I am expected to try harder," she said.

The Carson Valley volunteers were polled to evaluate the community profile.

Of the 25 people who completed the survey, half believed childhood obesity is an issue of concern in Carson Valley. Nearly 60 percent believed



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Steve Lewis, an extension educator with the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension discusses a study that was conducted on rural youth obesity.

community residents were knowledgeable about the link between environment and obesity, and "mildly supportive" of efforts to promote healthy eating and physical activity.

Half thought community leaders were "mildly engaged" in efforts to promote healthy kids and lifestyles.

Nearly 50 percent indicated they were "absolutely willing" to work for change in the community to make it easier for children and families to eat healthy and be physically active every day.

Visitors to the Green Living Festival on Sept. 21 at the River Fork Ranch will have an opportunity to discuss the research.

Lewis hopes the program will lead to results.

"I believe every time we meet and discuss anything, we change. It's subtle so far, but little seeds are germinating, they just need a little cultivation and nurturing. It takes somebody to own the garden."

When she met with the Carson Valley volunteers, John said she was impressed with new and

no-cost activities that were available.

Participants selected the Heritage Park community garden, county parks and playgrounds, farmers markets, the swim center, trails and walkable neighborhoods as positive factors.

Barriers included unsafe roads and sidewalks, lack of a safe bike path to connect the Gardnerville Ranchos to the center of Carson Valley, limited public transportation, easily accessible grocery stores or farmers markets.

All sectors of the

community are involved in the solutions, John said, from where to locate the next grocery store to an innovator coming up with a mobile fresh fruit and vegetable food truck.

"We'll come up with a model of what obesity prevention in a rural community might look like. The communities will come together and set long-term goals. One little change could make so much difference to make it easier for people to have easier access to healthier options," she said.

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